

The American
MERCURY



THREE YEARS OF DR. ROOSEVELT

H. L. MENCKEN

ARE THE CAPITALISTS ASLEEP?

HAROLD LORD VARNEY

The New Deal and Prohibition

Is Patriotism Necessary?

Dead Man. A Story

W. H. Hudson

An Open Letter to Mr. Jefferson

Sad Death of a Hero

Circumstantial Evidence

Portland: Athens of the West

A Penny a Word

The Man-God of Japan

ALBERT JAY NOCK

STRUTHERS BURT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

NUMBER
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March, 1936

THREE YEARS OF DR. ROOSEVELT	H. L. Mencken	257
A BOXER CALLED PANTHER. <i>Verse</i>	Reuel Denney	265
ARE THE CAPITALISTS ASLEEP?	Harold Lord Varney	266
AN OPEN LETTER TO MR. JEFFERSON	William M. Houghton	273
THE MAN-GOD OF JAPAN	Sydney Greenbie	277
THERE IS NO COMFORT NOW. <i>Verse</i>	V. James Chrasta	284
A PENNY A WORD	Anonymous	285
WINTER SONNET. <i>Verse</i>	Townsend Miller	292
SAD DEATH OF A HERO	Paul Y. Anderson	293
AMERICANA		302
W. H. HUDSON	Ford Madox Ford	306
IS PATRIOTISM NECESSARY?	Struthers Burt	318
DEAD MAN. <i>A Story</i>	James M. Cain	326
THE STATE OF THE UNION:		
The New Deal and Prohibition	Albert Jay Nock	333
CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE	Edwin Borchard	337
PORTLAND: ATHENS OF THE WEST	James Stevens	344
THESE CLOUDS. <i>Verse</i>	E. A. Richards	350
THE FIRST MUNITIONS KING	Jack Rohan	351
THIS SINGING BRANCH. <i>Verse</i>	Margaret Tynes Fairley	358
THE CLINIC:		
The Senatorial Diplomats	Royden J. Dangerfield	359
What Is a Reasonable Legal Fee?	Harry Hibschman	363
THE LIBRARY:		
Report on Rugged Proletarianism	Ernest Boyd	367
This Business of War	John W. Thomason, Jr.	369
What Is Mussolini?	Lawrence Dennis	372
The Brotherhood of Orpheus	William Rose Benét	375
Bertrand Russell's Searchlight	George Santayana	377
The Masculine Era	Agnes Repplier	379
Briefer Mention		381
THE CONTRIBUTORS		383
CHECK LIST		iv
RECORDED MUSIC	Irving Kolodin	xiv

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A PENNY A WORD

ANONYMOUS

I HAVE killed a thousand men. In the dark alleys of small towns I have waylaid and slugged them; on the foggy streets of sleeping cities I have clubbed and knifed them; in the dens of the tenderloin and the hideouts of gangsters I have shot them in cold blood; on the rolling pampas of the Argentine I have murdered them with my *bola*; on our own Western plains I have fanned my six-gun; aboard ships on every sea, in waterfront dives of every port, in tall city buildings and in quiet suburban homes, I have wrenched from my victims their last agonized cries, watched expressions of incredulity spread across their tortured faces. I have killed all these men in all these places — for a penny a word.

This diabolical career was entered upon willingly ten years ago, yet it is difficult to decide at whose door the blame should be placed. Certainly Sinclair Lewis and H. L. Mencken are not free from guilt: but for their anti-Babbitt cult, which embraced me upon my emergence from college, I would have followed my friends into sedate, established business, and no doubt would now be enjoying the tranquil boredom of a suburb, the pleasant security of \$10,000 a year, and the occasional exercise of golf. Instead, I joined the optimistic literary migration to New York, fleeing all the comforts of home in a quest for self-expression. But the quest led me in a strangely devious direction — into the pages of the pulp-paper magazines whose lurid scare covers I had seen shrieking at me from the railroad newsstands.

The pulps, I learned, dispensed day-dreams to hordes of Americans too unimaginative to dream for themselves. Some five million of these morons paid willingly each month for their canned dreams, and the manufacturers were hard pressed to meet the demand. I heard naught of “craftsmanship”, “atmosphere”, “sociological significance”, or any of the lofty generalities that had enveloped literature, for me, in an awesome aura. I was told that I had only to “get in touch with an editor”, “learn the formula”, and “bang it out”. The greedy maw of the pulp industry would devour all I could write, and thus I would be earning money while I served my literary apprenticeship.

Nothing could have sounded simpler. I would acquire through this hack writing a sense of story construction, an easy facility with words, a valuable working knowledge of public taste, and a confidence that would never come to a lonely garret dweller subsisting on rejection slips. Thus convinced that a pulp apprenticeship was an excellent stepping-stone to artistic fame, I eagerly began mastering the literary craft by “knocking out” stories for the cheap magazines which were springing up overnight.

Facility (of a kind) I certainly acquired, as well as confidence, *i. e.*, the confidence to write blandly on almost any subject under the sun. I wrote sea stories, although my longest boat trip had been from Cape Charles to Norfolk; I wrote stories of war in the air, although I had never been within

fifty feet of a military aeroplane; I wrote a series of pampas thrillers on the basis of reading one travel book; and I turned out Western thrillers without reading any book. When the editors wanted gangster stories, I produced them; and pseudo-science stories, too, and horror stories, voodoo stories, Northwest Mounted Police stories, and even one thrilling gem for an ill-fated publication called *Submarine Stories*. Turning occasionally to the love-story pulps, I would draw backgrounds and characters with regard only for the editors' desires: Broadway or Hollywood, racetrack or polo field, Newport or Shantytown — they all became the same for me.

I have written stories for drunken authors who sold them under their own names; I have had other writers turn them out for me when I was so sick of plots that they tasted like castor oil. I was actually one of the writers in a strange literary chain which has since become a famous gag, to be included in the "pulp play" that every pulpster dreams of writing some day. A friend telephoned me one afternoon and offered a cent-and-a-half a word if I would deliver a story to him by three o'clock the following afternoon, so that he could send it to his regular two-cent market later in the day. By the time I had the plot worked out in my mind, my wife returned with some friends who were to spend the evening. So I phoned another pulpster, offering a cent-and-a-quarter if he would write a story for me by two o'clock the following afternoon. He agreed, but became involved with convivial companions and phoned still another writer, promising one cent flat if delivery of the manuscript was made by noon. For some reason this man gave up the job and at midnight telephoned the original writer with a three-quarter cent offer. The creator of the chain had some fiery and uncomplimentary words for the lot of us, but he sat

down at his typewriter and wrote the piece himself before morning.

This feat, however, was not a record in pulp writing. I once knew a serial writer who retired to his hotel room with several quarts of whisky, and, between late Friday afternoon and early Monday morning, wrote 60,000 words which he sold before noon. Such speed, while it may mean temporary enrichment, binds the pulpster even more securely to his trade. Veteran hacks are addicted to the one-draft method of production; they never even glance at their copy after it leaves the machine. This of course makes a slap-dash style inevitable — and irremediable. Thus we seldom manage to improve our lot by making the better magazines, or slicks, as they are known to the trade. Occasionally I have put aside two weeks — all the time I can spare from the grind — in which to attempt a slick magazine story: but before the fortnight is over I always discover ingrown pulp habits in my work that would require months to eradicate. Then, discouraged by the enormity of the new task and the possibility of no immediate remuneration, I gratefully return to the trough.

There are writers who do escape, but the percentage is depressingly low. A number of current popular authors who once wrote for the pulps act as unwitting decoys to pulpsters, for the latter fail to realize that there has been a vast change in the craft since the early days. The modern pulps are collateral descendants of the dime novel. Most of them have lowered the age-level of their audiences; some appeal frankly to mental juveniles. Published at less cost than their predecessors, while none enjoys the circulation of the old days, their profits accrue from mass production. With lowered financial risks, new companies have entered the field with sweatshop methods and low standards. The pulps are now an industry,

separate and complete, and the breach between them and other literary enterprises has become correspondingly enormous.

The writers who fail to escape face sorry prospects. First, the rates of payment are extremely low: the average pulp pays from one to two cents a word; some less than a cent. A few writers receive more than two cents: they are the successes, and they earn from five to fifteen thousand a year — while they last. But they are surprisingly few in number.

I know I have never made anything like that much money — and I have sold hundreds of thousands of words to almost every important pulp market: *Blue Book*, *Popular*, *Munsey's*, *Street and Smith*, *Standard*, *Dell*, *Clayton*, *Butterick*, *Fawcett*, *Macfadden*, and lesser outfits whose names I have forgotten. My career started ten years ago, and I am still working for the same magazines. My stepping-stone became my highest step. Here I am, God help me, still a pulpster.

II

I struck my stride, in the game of hacking, early. What little there is to learn is apprehended quickly or not at all. The tools of my craft are: (1) an ability to manipulate indefinitely a given number of arbitrary situations into different plots that narrate the same basic story; (2) a knack in diction and prose that gives movement and vividness to action sequences; (3) a certain energy or vitality that endows mechanical concoctions with spurious "life". (I mention this last tool as distinct from the quality which endows all fiction with life, because the pulp writer has fewer symbols of reality to work with, relying chiefly on the vigor of the writing itself.) There is a minimum of luck in selling one's output. There are no log-rolling cliques, no reviewers, no sales pro-

motion, no chance capturing of the public fancy. There are no features to carry the reader; no circulation losses for advertising profit; and but few subscriptions. The magazine's problem is one of cash newsstand sales, depending solely on the entertainment value of its fiction. If a writer's product sells the magazine, his stuff is bought; if the stories don't appeal to the morons, he is out of luck. The check-up on the writer is immediate and final.

An average writer will "make about four markets", or find four magazines receptive to his work. If he sells a 6000-word story to each every month, or one story a week, he will earn ninety dollars a week — in theory. But in practice he will bump into the law of averages in rejections. It is virtually impossible for a writer to turn out weekly stories of equal quality. The myriad human factors which upset his writing machinery — illness of himself or his wife, toothache or eyestrain, moving or vacations, domestic troubles, visits from out-of-towners or friendly dropper-inners, hangovers from parties, the dreaded staleness which visits every writer — any of these will prove sufficient to halt production temporarily or indefinitely. And when production stops, earning stops.

The greatest hazard outside the writer himself is the constant change in editorial policies. A few magazines enjoy something of a stable audience because they are established and have become a habit with readers: but even they must vary their standards to meet fickle public taste. Most of the others are new and depend solely on immediate appeal: they must serve precisely what the pulp-reading public wants at precisely the right time. As a rule these policy changes are of such fine distinction as to be imperceptible to the outsider. But to the writer they are drastic.

For instance, about ten years ago an en-

tirely new type of story bloomed overnight — the war story. George T. Delacorte, Jr., operating a shoestring outfit, was first in the field with *War Stories* and several companion books. He made a fortune and founded a successful publishing house. But the war fever is over now. Delacorte has not a single war magazine, and all of us hack writers who learned the phraseology and background of battlefield horror have been forced to enter new fields of which we know equally little. Adventure stories, once big sellers, now barely support a few long-established pulps. Several years ago the detective story was revolutionized almost overnight by Dashiell Hammett and Joseph Shaw, who introduced the hard-boiled private dick. Deduction in criminology became a blight. Every hero had to be tough and strong, had to bull his way into the accumulation of a few clues mainly by conking and being conked. It was an easy style to acquire and soon developed into a blueprint formula. Unfortunately, the hard-boiled dick is now on the wane and as soon as some bright editor starts a new pattern, we will all have to learn something else.

But whatever the style of the story, the pulp reader has rigid likes and dislikes which must be catered to. In the first place, he objects to any and all characterizations, on the ground that they slow the action. Character mutations are anathema to him: he wants types which are instantly recognizable. In Westerns, the hero is invariably tall and wiry, with eyes that can be blue as the desert sky or twin slits of steel. He is grim but he can laugh, usually just a quirk on one side of his tight lips. He pronounces doom in colorful terms and can deliver it with fist or six-gun. The villain must be large, florid, and powerful, or the small, crafty type; he is sneeringly boastful and possesses no trait to endear him to society. The sheriff is either a henchman of the

villain, or the old-school, fast-shooting law-giver. The reader must be able to identify each on his first appearance.

In detective fiction it is much the same. A novelette was once returned for revision to a successful pulp writer because it contained two leading characters who, the editor said, diffused the interest. One was a plodding, honest young lawyer, the other a suave magician: the first used his fists as defense, the second his mystic powers. The writer was ordered to rewrite his opus, playing down the lawyer and building up the magician. The novelette comprised 20,000 words, but in two days the author returned it, rewritten: he had given the lawyer's scenes to the magician by the simple process of transposing their names. In the climax, when they were both fighting in an underground hideout, the magician also was given the lawyer's fists — again by a substitution of one name for the other.

But the most important variations are to be found in the plots. Strongly plotted stories, developing complicated situations that build genuine suspense, must keep their situations as plausible as possible; they demand but little action and this must appear credible; the idea is always primitive. On the other hand, in the story with enough plot only to hold sequences of action together, the situations are implausible, the action wild, bloodthirsty, and often ridiculous. We have to watch the constant contrast in emphasis between these two extremes of plot. In the writing itself the flux is from simplified, straightforward pulp-prose to an effusion of hyperbolic clichés. As for the taboos of editors, they are multiple and varied. Yet with all these variations, changes, and taboos, we must be glibly familiar. When a magazine's policy changes we must adapt ourselves to another. Always it is difficult, sometimes impossible. At best we lose time and momentum.

Of course there is one feature of policy change over which we have no control — the mortality of editors, which is high. For each editor has personal, idiosyncratic preferences or hates, usually too petty to make public. A pulpster must be familiar with these. When he is so aware, he will have a “swell market with So-and-So”. But when that editor is bounced, the writer will have to build up another. Frequently he will not again be as successful as with Old So-and-So. In such ways are writers killed off through sheer wear and tear.

The pulpster does not earn more money by trying to secure higher rates: he must do it by selling more words. The damndest lure ever devised for committing a man to suicide is the contract for a monthly book-length novel which may pay as high as \$1000, or as low as \$300. Some authors write one, some two a month. But at the rate of twenty novels a year, it is obvious that only giants can last. And there are few giants.

Without the book-length novel bait, a writer going at full speed will produce a million words a year. This incessant output of imbecilic rubbish is ruinous. Even a congenital pulpster, whose brain is not affected, becomes mechanical. His sole object is to turn out the stuff rapidly; any pride in craftsmanship is lost. Naturally the springs of energy dry: the mechanical concoctions become tired and dated. Then the writer descends the scale of rates and magazines until he is supplanted by younger men. Because of this influx of enthusiastic newcomers the relatively steady seller is always crowded by rivals. As an average writer, I have no security. I can never pause to rest. No matter how I feel, I must keep at the machine in relentless, merciless, deadening toil. The toll on my energy will be inevitably fatal to my work, as it has been to others. Added to this, making my future more uncertain, are those minute variations

I have mentioned. They are cumulative, and over a decade prove tremendous. As I grow older it will be progressively more difficult for me to adapt myself to new policies. Past forty, it will be as hard to learn a new approach as for a ham comedian of the same age to become a dramatic actor.

III

Except for the outstanding successes, we pulpsters have not earned enough to secure our years past the point of diminishing utility — and no one has ever advocated old-age pensions for writers. Certainly the desk offers us no sanctuary, for the plight of the editor is equally gloomy. Several times I have sought refuge from the writing strain in an editorial office. As assistant, or editor of one or more magazines, I have worked for the companies I sold to, and have bought millions of words for them. I've had magazines fold under me. I've seen young hopefuls enter offices for jobs with the same delusions that snared me. They see the pulps as the fringe of their desired world, the passageway to the land of literary self-expression. They tell me of the prominent magazine editors who have served pulp apprenticeships, but they will not listen in turn when I tell them of the very few who escape.

For the pulp editorial worker is trained for pulps and nothing else. These magazines are an entrance to a blind alley, a stepping-stone to oblivion. The editor lacks even the advantage of the writer's mobility and whatever satisfaction may lie in individual creation. Hence his obscure slavery in the privies of literature is even more ignominious, and the volume and incessancy of his pulp impressions more stultifying. Such men edit in the same mass production manner in which their authors write. Most

of the staffs are small. If a magazine is edited by one man, he will be without assistance, and will produce the book singlehanded, from reading manuscripts to checking foundry proofs. He writes his own blurbs for forthcoming features, his own advertising copy for house magazines. But usually he will have two or more magazines, and assistants. One man I know edits more than ten magazines at the same time.

Publishers as a rule prefer young men as editors. Their enthusiasm and fresh ambition will more than compensate for lack of experience; they will work for little, and are capable of great effort. The older editor is less adaptable: by the time he reaches his middle forties, even though a congenital pulpster, he can hardly retain judgment, discrimination, and enthusiasm for new policies, after reading the billionth repetition of the same hoary asininity. The fine edge of enthusiasm and freshness has been blunted forever, usually during his apprenticeship as an assistant. There not only must he read several hundred stories a week, but out of the selected group he must edit copy on those already purchased; later he reads proof on them and, as a final test of his love for his work, checks them in foundry. Try that process on even your favorite author sometime, and imagine the effect of ten years of tripe.

But the doom awaiting younger men in some way could be forestalled if there were not the ever-present specter of losing the job. Every change of policy means a new editor; every poor guess by a publisher means a new editor. Whenever a magazine which the publisher thinks should sell, fails to do so, there is an immediate cry for an editorial shake-up. The incumbent is fired, usually with brief notice. The assistant's plight is even worse. The first cut in overhead expense falls on him. He does the dirty work, and derives no glory; often the

editor jealously guards the door of the publisher's office against any bright ideas of his underlings. And the editor is the only one who knows the value of the assistant's work. The latter's outlets for advancement are only two. If he has stuck to his poorly paid, humble, and harrowing post long enough to bring himself into the publisher's consciousness, he may get a chance at the editor's job when the editor leaves; or else, by a fortunate contact, he may make a connection elsewhere as editor. Or, finally, he can do what I have done several times — abandon his grimy security for the uncertainty of free-lancing. But assistant or editor, the mortality is high, the risk great, the pay poor. I saw a man come in one day, arrange his desk, gather supplies, and dictate letters announcing his new connection. The next day he was fired.

The assistant starts at \$25 or \$30 a week, rarely achieves over \$50, averages \$35. The editor begins at, say, \$45, rarely earns more than \$100, averages around \$65. His reward is that if he slaves diligently and is fortunate, he may not lose his job. The pay is not commensurate with the training and ability brought to the job, and the responsibility invested in it. Further, when a house is extremely successful, the editors of the magazines are not paid a fair proportion of the money their ability has earned. Publishers assert that salaries are low because of the nature of their investment. And it is true that profits are slim on single magazines and depend on mass production. The cost of the average pulp is around \$5000 on a print order of 125,000 copies. This figure varies to a low, in some cases, of \$3500; and to a high of \$7000 or more. A ten-cent magazine, which grosses the publisher a little better than six cents, must sell 85,000 copies to break even: if it sells 100,000, the publisher nets \$1000 an issue. Four months of the year are poor ones for newsstand sales;

in this period half the yearly gain may be lost. Thus the publisher may pocket about \$4000 a year on a fairly good magazine. But one issue of a flop will wipe out the margin, as will yearly returns on an unpopular magazine. Therefore the wise publisher carries from six to a dozen titles. If he publishes say five, the losses on two-fifths will counter-balance the profits on two-fifths: the remaining one-fifth, selling perhaps 200,000 a month, will net him from fifty to one hundred thousand dollars.

Why does he not eliminate his unprofitable pulps? Economics. The more magazines he prints, the less the overhead on any one. Paper and printing and office and editorial costs are all reduced proportionately. The more magazines one house issues, the better authors it can procure, because more of their work can be purchased. It is worthwhile to carry a magazine which only breaks even, in order to procure exclusively for the successful books the work of several popular authors. Also, bulk circulation wins favoritism from the distributor, and can procure from advertising as much as \$25,000 a year net profit.

And then there is always the danger of the lead magazine going into a decline. Many of the recent big successes are now dead. The publisher must have a sound business, producing at least a small profit, to carry the house while a new winner is being developed. Hence his ruthless attitude toward his workers.

But editors, young or old, with wives and children, do not view the loss of their jobs in the broad economic aspect. I have seen them go from job to job, each becoming warped after his own fashion, each cursing pulps in his own dirty, dreary cubicle. Hopeful and hopeless, bitter and pathetic, determined and resigned, we are, writers and editors, in the main a cynical lot. We have for too long purveyed primitive day-

dreams which do not develop the brain or ennoble the character. The best writers and the best editors are those whose cultural level most closely approximates that of their readers. But unfortunately, there are a number of toilers in fiction's back-alley, particularly among editors, who are not morons. I know a classicist in the pulps who retires to his exquisite apartment after his day's labors, and reads Santayana over a glass of Madeira. He is past fifty, a life-hater, a reviler of aspirations. He is, I admit, something of an extreme — chiefly because he has lasted so long. But twenty years from now I will count myself fortunate if I have accumulated an apartment with Madeira and Santayana, and have retained enough sanity to appreciate them. . . .

Some of my colleagues have become resigned, turning to esoteric literature or gin for solace. Others have become resigned without a solace; fear rules their destiny. They are a servile, pitiful lot. Some have become embittered and, deliberately layering their souls with callouses, are striving to get all they can out of it while they last. Others have distorted themselves into an unhealthy adaptation, by turns deluding and reviling themselves. They defend their positions fanatically against outside attack and bemoan their fate amongst themselves. I myself am one of a group of writers either unadaptable or unresignable, all of us grimly determined to fight our way out. We do not allow a pulp-paper magazine in our homes; we refuse to talk shop; we make every effort to forget the whole business when we cover up the typewriter. Our group of mal-adapts is not typical, however. I know many men who are still young enough or stupid enough to believe they are serving an apprenticeship out of which they will graduate into better work. I know others (of a relatively small group) who have

found their ultimate career in the pulps and who actually give themselves airs of importance on the basis of their achievements. The largest single group is composed of congenital pulpsters: but they, too, are dissatisfied; even though fitted by mentality and temperament for pandering rubbish, their desire for security makes them uneasy for the future.

What finally becomes of worn-out pulpsters is a mystery into which none of us dares delve. We prefer to believe that somehow we will beat the game. We are occasionally encouraged by literary contributions from our more erudite friends, on newspapers and in advertising agencies, who believe they can write salable pulp stories any time they are pressed for money. But the most illiterate hack would be ashamed of what they turn out. For success in the pulps is not, as many think, a matter of "writing down".

That is the real tragedy for us who came

to the pulps for training. While we are writing this daydream in which some potential two-fisted barroom fighter or glamorous captivator or gunslick bronco-buster can identify himself, we must believe it at the moment. We must inject some enthusiasm to give it false vitality and spurious reality. It is working oneself into this alien mood, this primitive emotional and cerebral pattern, that poisons the brain like a drug, atrophies the perspective, and dulls the spirit.

And yet I myself have become a dependable purveyor to those five million morons who pay a few nickels each month for their mechanized dreams. I am one of the camp-followers of the writing profession, the rag-tag and bobtail of the fiction parade, who, for a bare subsistence, scavenge in the garbage heaps of literature. I am one of those disillusioned hack authors whose hopes lie somewhere back in the dim golden years when everyone believed in self-expression.



WINTER SONNET

BY TOWNSEND MILLER

THINKING all winter in a quiet place,
 From long interrogation of the stone
 I see that such perfection never was
 Except it be unuttered and alone.
 Brave hearts who speak but braver at the last
 Who keep in silence the sufficient word
 And learn of snow that eloquence is most
 When the full hour is inner and unheard.

O whiter muse, take refuge in the rock
 And dream the ages out with marble eyes;
 Dwell here for ever by the endless sea
 Whose wave no moon shall lift nor tempest shake.
 Yea, here in peace and casual of the skies
 Compose your wing against eternity.